

6th Sunday in Easter – Year A 2023

Acts 8:5-8; Ps 65 1 Pet 3-15-18; John 14:15-21

Throughout this Gospel reading there is a constant refrain, which is the commandment to love:

- If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love
- I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.
- This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
- You are my friends if you do what I command you.
- These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

The idea of using the word 'command' in association with love seems a little incongruous. We live in a world in which we seem to be told that there are two patterns of love. They are mutually contradictory, but I will not accuse the world of being overly fastidious in its application of reason in its pursuit of ideas.

The first understanding of love is involuntary love: we should follow the impulse of love wherever it leads us. The stirrings of our body and our mind should be heeded, and not subject to imagined laws or constraints. In this view, we are just like an animal who should be let loose in the field to graze wherever we want. This image of 'love' is appetite.

The second love is imagined to be entirely voluntary. This path to happiness is portrayed as being entirely elective of the mind. Someone in this frame of mind might say 'I choose to love what or who I wish and how I wish. It is in my control. This is the way I will lead my life, choice among choices.'

You may notice that both modes of love, the voluntary and involuntary, might give you the basis to do the exact same thing, just with a different justification. 'I cannot help eating the last piece of chocolate cake, because I simply love cake.' Or 'I choose to eat the last piece of cake: my body needs food and I can think of no reason to leave it for the person next to me who clearly does not need it.'

But surely, surely someone cannot be commanded (or ordered) to love, not even cake. And even if they were commanded it would be bound to fail as love can only be either voluntary or involuntary.

Both these current popular expressions of love ignore the Will: 'the Will to Love'. The Will to Love is at the center of Christian marriage vows:

I take thee, to be my wedded Wife,
To have and to hold from this day forward,
For better, for worse
For richer, for poorer
In sickness and in health
To love and to cherish
Till death do us part.

Christian marriage takes the first stirrings of involuntary love (My gosh she is attractive, funny, intelligent) transforms it with an intellectual, voluntary love (she will make a good life-long, mother and Christian mother) and then crowns it with a love of the Will (I will turn my eye from others, I will work, I will be loyal and chaste, I will be tender and selfless.). I place myself under the will to love. I place myself under the command to love.

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It seems, in this image reveals that not only can love be commanded, it makes love beautiful, and not just animal or intellectual, but human and heavenly when it is crowned by the Will. This is the nature of the commandments of love that Jesus speaks of. It is the nature of the love between The Son of God and God the Father, which is being shared with us.

The Gospel opens with the words 'As the Father had loved me, so have I loved you.' Jesus is saying that he has been obedient to the Father's gift of love and the claims of that love over him, and that his whole life's ministry on earth has been a response to that command. That command he has extended to us, that daily Will to Love whatever comes. I will love you, Jesus, as you have loved me. The Will to Love of Christmas Day, the Will to love of the Crucifixion, the Will to love of the Ascension. I will learn to forgive, I will learn to have mercy, I will learn to be generous, I will learn to weep, I will learn to laugh, I will learn to be poor, I will learn to use judgement: through the thick and the thin I will love you. Today I understand, today I accept the commandment anew.